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*Soc 401.2 Reflections
on Espionage*

P. Hollander, John

Spies, codes find a niche in poetry

Reflections on Espionage, by John Hollander.
New York: Atheneum. \$8.95.

By Victor Howes

"Reflections on Espionage" is a book-length poem (72 pages) about spies. It consists of the day-to-day transmissions of secret agent Cupcake to his controls Lyrebird and Image. It deals with Cupcake's double life, his surveillances and suspicions of his fellow spies, Felucca, the Foot, Thumbtack ("dull and rather reliable"), and Artificat, who was "broken early today."

Occasionally Cupcake makes a personal contact, face to face with a trusted agent, meeting him on a plane or "in a vast and/ Nearly empty part of a new aerodrome," but for the most part he works at his cover employment as an art curator, and spends his evenings encoding his meditations on the perfect agent.

The perfect agent would have "no cover life at/ All, but . . . would appear to disappear when/ Not working on an assignment." He would be "an agent/ Whose only life was a part of the work./ He would be a pure null."

Then too, there might be a "Final Cipher," the "Sybil of Codes." Such a cipher would be inevitable, "effortless to handle, and yet impossible/ To misuse . . . So patent,/ So transparent as not to be there at all/ . . . A poem whose form was of the world itself."

Ultimately, "Reflections on Espionage" is itself a giant code. In it, John Hollander, who has written seven volumes of poetry since 1958, talks about art and artists, about a way of seeing the world without being seen, objectively, without distortion. Hollander knows it's impossible, but objectivity tempts him — a classical, an Eliotesque ideal.

Readers looking for the latest lowdown on the CIA or the FBI will not find "Reflections" illuminating. Nor will the reader be thrilled and chilled while he waits for another spy to come in out of the cold. Hollander's ingenuities are inventive enough, but they are cerebral. His excitements are the excitements of language and idea, not derring and do.

His poem is a "strange, complex assignment/ Playing on a medley of levels." At one level it refers to the arts, at another to the sciences, philosophy, history. The work of deciphering codes is multi-faceted, and as Hollander observes about the work, "It is not given us to complete/ It, neither are we free to desist from it."

In the last enlargement of Hollander's surprisingly fruitful metaphor, life is the cipher, and we are all of us, inevitably, spies in the house of life.

Victor Howes is a poet, essayist, and novelist who teaches English at Northeastern University.